

Transforming Iron John

Caring for the male soul

James M. Bowler

A FEW YEARS AGO ON A WEEKEND RETREAT I was directing a male lawyer in his mid-thirties. I was desiring that he meet Jesus, experience his love and deepen their relationship. However, this person was more interested in talking about how he served his church and God. At the end of the weekend my feeling was that the two of us just did not meet and that nothing happened to deepen this person's relationship with God. I now realize that the blame for this lies with the director this retreatant encountered. I failed to meet him where he was in his journey.

Last summer two of us were debriefing the summer interns after they completed directing a retreat. There were four women and four men in the group. We opened the meeting by listening to David Haas's *Song of the body of Christ*. Instinctively the four women broke into beautiful body movement while the four men just sat peacefully. The difference could not have been more poignant.

In dealing with my lawyer friend there was a resistance to the relational that I did not appreciate at the time. Also, it was clear that the four men in the group mentioned above did not spontaneously manoeuvre into what was a beautiful physical expression. What follows is an attempt to explain these and similar realities particular to many of the male gender.

The challenging issue

Many times I have heard the observation that more women than men (and especially male priests) seem to avail themselves of retreats and spiritual direction. There seems to be the impression that women are more open to the spiritual and take more advantage of the wellspring Christian spirituality has to offer than do men. I wonder if the reason for this might be a tendency to expose men to an approach which is much more relevant for women. Has there not emerged a subtle value that men would be better disciples if they manifested more comfort with feminine qualities such as feelings, vulnerability and body expression?

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While this may be an appropriate goal, one author claims that such 'gender blending' is not a good starting point for men.¹

This is a problematic issue. Since the late 1960s women have made a significant contribution toward defining both themselves and an appropriate spirituality for most women to grow in their relationship to God. As the endnotes for this article testify, men have only begun this process within the past decade. There are basic differences. The journey toward wholistic spiritual integration is significantly different for the majority of men than for the majority of women. Ministers facilitating this process would do well to be cognizant of this understanding when they accompany individuals or groups. Two cautions are appropriate here. Men, like women, are not identical in the capacities and proclivities they possess. In this article I am talking about a spectrum where the majority of men feel more at home at one end and the majority of women at the other. Also, in this context sexual orientation is a variable that deserves its own unique exploration.

Doing vs being

There is a common perception that while most women gravitate more naturally to being and relationship, most men are more comfortable with doing and self-reliance. It is very interesting to note that in the preface to his first edition of *Men at work*, James Dittes is critical of men in their 'love affairs and religious commitments to their work'. His aim at the time was about helping men get 'unhooked from such dependencies'. However, ten years later in the preface to the second edition he takes a different tack. Rather than repressing this tendency, he aims at transforming it. 'If we men do make a religion of our work, let us give full appreciation to our talent and desire, disclosed therein, for being religious.'²

With most men, it is important to utilize their 'doing' as a point of entry to self-discovery, the affective and the spiritual. Another way of expressing this is that men are much more comfortable talking about what they do for God rather than how they are with God. Ignatius of Loyola appears to be quite conscious of this in the suggested colloquy for the first exercise of the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises. Here he encourages the retreatant to come before Jesus dying on the cross and ask three questions: What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I do for Christ? Some time ago at a seminar the presenter³ made the suggestion that for women more appropriate questions may be: How have I been with Christ? How am I being with

Christ? How would I like to be with Christ? This has been validated in my own experience of facilitating the Exercises.

A fundamental difference

Without question men and women are biologically, psychologically and spiritually significantly different from one another. Recognizing the oppressiveness of cultural stereotypes and generalizations, we know that beneath them lies a rich variance that requires deference for emotional and spiritual health. Although both women and men possess masculine and feminine principles, they develop and express these in different ways. There have been many attempts to express the difference between masculine and feminine qualities. Carl Jung employed *logos* and *eros*. The ancient Chinese expressed this in the terms of *yang* and *yin*. Here I am using a preference for *doing* (characterized by initiating, being self-reliant, assertive, controlling) in contrast to one for *being* (marked by being receptive, acquiescent, dependent, relational, vulnerable). Also, these categories are not mutually exclusive. The Jungian analyst, Edward Whitmont, writes:

Thus maleness and femaleness are determined not by an absolute but by a relative predominance of one set of characteristics over the other . . . Thus Jung's postulate of a recessive maleness in the woman (the animus) and of recessive femaleness in the man (the anima) . . . can be understood and accepted as analogous to biological findings.⁴

Assimilating this recessive counter-sexual part of one's identity is a most important part of one's spiritual journey. However, this article will restrict itself to exploring this journey for men.

In a man the anima functions as his soul,⁵ the source of life and path to God. Yet within him is a built-in resistance to respecting and assimilating this part of himself. Carl Jung speaks of loss of soul in this context⁶ and it is precisely this that Christian ministry seeks to prevent. However, those responsible for this ministry must also respect a man's resistance. Too much too soon of 'the feminine' may be too threatening. Those involved in the ministry of spiritual direction and the facilitation of retreats need to discern the level of readiness for a particular praxis. Terrence Real writes:

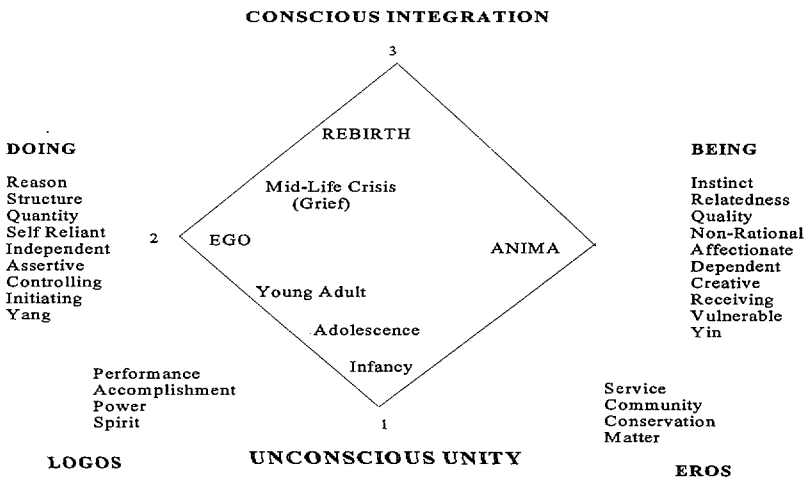
In twenty years of work with men and their families I have come to see men's struggles with developing neglected emotions and relational skills as about on a par with women's struggles to redevelop assertive,

instrumental skills. Generally, it seems about as difficult for the sons of Narcissus to open up and listen as it is for the daughters of Echo to speak.⁷

The developmental path

This account of the stages in a man's development is summarized on the left side of the diagram which follows.

The infant male begins with an unconscious unity between the masculine and feminine (1). However during the process of achieving his place in the social order he progressively differentiates himself from his anima or the feminine. In my experience the main difference between ministering to high school boys, young adults and those who are approaching the apex of their careers (*doing*, 2) is the degree of dissociation they manifest from their feminine side. It is through the midlife crisis that a man reconnects with the feminine in a rebirth that consciously respects his anima. The remainder of the human journey is an attempt consciously to integrate his masculine and feminine energies (3). The young lawyer I referred to at the beginning of this article certainly personified someone approaching the apex of his career and about as consciously far removed from his feminine or *being* qualities as he will ever be.⁸



Spirit versus body

Unlike women, men are more inclined to prioritize spirit and mind, and to view their bodies as inferior to these. Differently from when they are on the sports field or in the health club – places of acute body consciousness – men find it difficult to make a connection with their bodies when they are in the context of prayer. Male spiritual consciousness is dualistic – outside of and above the body or nature. Thus there is a tendency to equate holiness with bodilessness. For men the unknown, mysterious transcendent God is beyond – external to their self. God is ‘up there’ rather than deep within. According to James Nelson⁹ this dualism is due to biological differences, the genitalization of sexuality, and the distant or absent father. For men external sex organs communicate that the unknown mystery is out there. Sex is giving rather than receiving and is associated with a certain performance anxiety. This separation phenomenon also dissociates sex from the self and, otherwise than for women, from intimacy. For most women sexuality is internal, immanent and mysterious while for most men it is external, transcendent and instrumental. Looking at the genitalization of sex, men tend to emphasize acts rather than relationship. Their sexual feelings are much more genitally centred and they are much more embarrassed about the whole subject than are women. Thus it is quite difficult and challenging, but essential, for a man to integrate his sexuality with his spirituality.

Finally a man has been forced to separate from his mother in order to discover his identity. Looking to his father for affection and approval, he often experiences an emotionally (and often physically) distant individual who frequently rewards, at best, with conditional love. Even in the best of situations the son often feels that he somehow does not measure up to his father’s expectation or is not worthy of his blessing.¹⁰ While the relationship between father and son is very complex, and even though traditional patterns have begun to change in our culture, the lack of connection between father and son certainly has reinforced the *doing* rather than the *being* end of the continuum. Since many men are not yet ready to deal with a feminine image of God, those involved in facilitating the ministry of Christian spirituality need to be aware of the tendency in men to project their father relationship on to their operating image of God.

Male grief

If most men prefer the *doing* in contrast to the *being* end of the continuum, it is here that we discover the source of male discontent,

shame and grief. Many individuals live with the feeling that somehow life has not lived up to what was intended for them. James Dittes¹¹ develops this thesis within the context of an appropriate Christian male spirituality. Men deal with phenomena such as unfulfilled promise and a destiny not achieved – the heartache of incompleteness. They hunger to be in control, and their perennial question is ‘Is that all there is?’

It has to do with a man’s deep and gnawing hunger that he seldom feels he is living fully. Something is missing. A man is willing to make the Faustian bargain with the script, to surrender his own life, his very soul, for the script’s promise that life will be complete. A man fears he is living partially, only a fraction of what is intended and promised. It hurts, he wants, because he is afflicted with the faith that there is a richer birthright intended for him – but it’s missing. This may be a wound we are born with and are fated to live with, unrepaired, and to die with.¹²

For Dittes, this religious lust for destiny is the source of man’s hope. His vocation is ‘to save life from its sorrow by summoning the transcendent’.¹³ The good news is that God is present to us in life’s losses, disappointments and injustices. However, the power of shame in the male often serves as a barrier to this grace.

The challenge for the Christian minister

If Christian ministry is to address this male condition, it must meet men where they are. If this is not acknowledged and accommodated, the outcome is that the men get caught up in a dualistic spirituality that transcends their lived experience. The results are alienation, irrelevancy or threat. Furthermore, to take hold in a person, their spirituality must be integrated with their existential truth. The challenge in ministering to men is to offer hope in the context of their lived reality. In addition, in the spirit of Ignatius of Loyola, God is to be found within the context of ‘all things’. I would like to introduce the ancient notion of archetype made popular by Carl Jung as a way to do this. Archetypes are instinctual patterns flowing from an objective universal psyche which endow a person with strong affective energy. Powerful and mysterious, they keep recurring globally in all people’s psyches. Whitmont writes:

What Jung calls the objective psyche may be likened to an encompassing energy stratum from which arise varying field activities

discernable to the experienced observer through the patternings of image, emotion and drive configurations. These psychic field expressions Jung has called archetypes of the objective psyche. They are typical energy configurations which are activated by situations and problems.¹⁴

Examples of these are multiple. I will develop the archetypes of warrior, king, pilgrim, father and son in the context of fostering male spiritual development. One writer claims that the archetype of warrior 'holds profound power for masculine psychology and spirituality' and best describes the dynamic of the male psyche.¹⁵ It is not difficult to imagine the types of behaviour emanating from this energy: the warrior within enables a man to know what he wants and how to get it. When accessed, it enables him to live fully dedicated in loyalty to a cause; it instils within him the capacity for commitment and self-discipline. Ignatius of Loyola utilizes this capacity for warrior energy in his famous meditations on The Kingdom, Two Standards and Three Classes.¹⁶ In the Kingdom meditation Christ the King is pictured as saying:

'My will is to conquer the whole world and all my enemies, and thus to enter into the glory of my Father. Therefore, whoever wishes to come with me must labor with me, so that through following me in the pain they may follow me in the glory.'¹⁷

It is obvious how a movement such as liberation theology is also able to access and engage this archetype. Again, in both these instances the emphasis is on *doing* rather than *being*.

I do not wish to imply that all archetypal warrior energy is good. If not complemented it can lead to burnout and the lack of hope manifested in the question, 'Is that all there is?' Taken to its extremes it is capable of sadism or masochism.¹⁸ The spiritual challenge for the man is to identify this energy, assert it and allow it to be transformed into a mature, healthy expression. To do this he must allow his *doing* posture to be gradually complemented by energy flowing from his *being* component or anima. I believe this is a major reason why Ignatius includes the Third and Fourth Weeks in his Spiritual Exercises. The unblemished commitment resulting from the Second Week needs the taming and maturation which comes through incorporating the graces received in these latter dynamics.

Three modes to help men name and deal with their discontent, shame and grief

Dittes offers three different continuums of images and expressions of the warrior archetype. The first contrasts the journeying Magi with King Herod in the second chapter of Matthew's Gospel.¹⁹ The Magi, as searchers, were open to the exploration of alternatives and something new. Their wisdom encouraged them to listen and probe for new ways of responding to the question 'Is that all there is?' In contrast, Herod obviously feared the threat of something new and attempted to use his power to suppress it. It clearly was not an either-or situation for the Magi. Temporarily they were enticed by Herod but in the end their freedom allowed them to 'return to their country by another route'.

Inside each man is a warrior energy that can gravitate in either direction. Also, it is never a straightforward situation. At one pole you have the guardian of the establishment who is highly motivated by wanting to be secure. Preferring the traditional and familiar, he is very suspicious and fearful of anything new and exerts much energy repressing this. In many ways he prefers this desolate sorrow to the joy of new life. At the other end of the continuum is the man who is excited through probing alternatives to the status quo. Work that promises challenge and joy will take priority over security. This individual communicates an idealism for social issues and will be involved with others in an attempt to ameliorate conditions where they do not meet these ideals.

The second contrast is the difference between the pilgrim and the conqueror.²⁰ Both are motivated by discontent with the status quo but channel their warrior capability in different modes. Self-reliant and destructive, the conqueror's aim is to control others; he manifests much vindictiveness and arrogance; because he is reluctant to listen, his effort is usually futile. In contrast, the pilgrim is marked by humility and a contemplative approach to life. His aim is to enhance the quality of life both for himself and others. Being unconventional, he directs his search towards the unknown or the 'not yet'. The difference between Herod and John the Baptist in chapter 14 of Matthew's Gospel exemplifies the two emphases this continuum represents. The pilgrimages of Abraham and John the Baptist may be of help in eliciting the constructive energy this archetype offers.

The incorporation by the father of the son within is the third image.²¹ On one end of the continuum we have the father, the man who sets limits, who lives out of past accomplishments and is dictated to by cultural expectations. At the other end the son is motivated by

possibility, hope and vocation. 'An adult man is incomplete, off balance, one sided, distorted unless he stays connected with the boyish part, the son he was and is.'²² Dittes offers a very provocative thought as to how God as Father and Jesus as Son exemplify this polarity as constitutive of the very nature of the divine. There is much here to encourage any man toward continued growth and wholeness. 'Unless you become like little children you can not enter the kingdom of God.'

Applications for retreat directors

In his closing pages Dittes claims that 'authenticity for men – feeling "saved" . . . is to be found within those modes of living that appear most characteristic of men, *not in being shamed or coached out of those modes*'.²³ Spiritual directors and retreat givers must be careful not to exacerbate, rather than heal, male discontent, shame and grief. There have been times when I have to admit I have been guilty of this. One time was the directed prayer weekend with my young lawyer friend referred to toward the beginning of this article. In situations like this spiritual directors need continually to evaluate their expectations as to how a person may pray. In individual direction with men it is often advantageous to start with what they are *doing* for God and get them to reflect on what is going on inside them before, during and after this activity. Often present but unacknowledged (and I frequently experience this, especially with priests) is a rich religious experiential component. When this is brought to light one witnesses the directee expressing feelings which manifest much consolation and a far deeper interpersonal relationship with God than he might have been aware of. The directee also comes to appreciate that he is praying more than he thinks.

Occasionally I offer a weekend workshop for men which explores various male archetypes in the context of living the Christian life. Often individuals realize their need to access the warrior within in order to achieve the growth or healing they desire. I have witnessed this energy utilized by an adopted man to find and meet his biological mother, and by an artist who gained the courage to show his works in an exhibition.

Ten years ago I occasionally preached the traditional men's weekend retreat. I used to get very frustrated at the participants' reluctance to share with one another anything that was occurring in their interior life. However, one weekend I was giving a retreat to a Knights of Columbus' group. As a theme I used material from what I had read about the warrior archetype as this might manifest itself in the vision of their own organization. I was amazed at the energy and sharing this

unleashed. Their myth had been renewed, making them feel good about who they were and the value of what they did and could do.

Before another weekend I had been reading much that had been written pertaining to the pain and regret involved in father-son relationships and, very tentatively, made this the subject of the final session. The result was remarkable. I had never seen these men (most in their late 50s and 60s) so animated, vulnerable and self-revelatory. They shared not only the wounds they carried from the way they were fathered but also, owing to feelings of inadequacy, their regrets about the way they had themselves acted as fathers. Their criticism was that I had not introduced the topic earlier in the retreat.

Now I understand the reason for this. The lack of response I experienced on the traditional layman's preached retreat lay within the realm of my own expectations. These were geared much more to the *being* than to the *doing* end of the spectrum. Rather than going in their door, I expected them to enter through mine. To be honest, I was also overly influenced by the rhetoric of feelings and relationship in much of the literature on spiritual direction while not being wholly convinced myself.

I would like to close by quoting a principle Ignatius offers in his *Spiritual Exercises*.²⁴

The Exercises are to be adapted to the capabilities of those who want to engage in them, i.e. age, education or intelligence are to be taken into consideration. Hence someone uneducated or of poor health should not be given things that cannot be undertaken without fatigue and from which no profit is to be derived. Similarly, in order that each may feel more at ease and derive the best profit, what is given to the exercitant should be in accordance with his or her dispositions.

Perhaps much of what is being written today about gender issues and their application to Christian spirituality, ministry and retreats could be regarded as a contemporary way of applying this rubric.

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NOTES

- 1 For a clear delineation of this problem see the introduction and chapter I of Patrick Arnold SJ, *Wildmen, warriors, and kings: masculine spirituality and the Bible* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).
- 2 James Dittes, *Men at work* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), pp 7–10. Dittes is professor of pastoral theology at Yale Divinity School and both creative and distinctive in what he writes about male spirituality.
- 3 I am very grateful to Paul V. Robb SJ, the founder of the Institute for Spiritual Leadership, for this insight.
- 4 Edward C. Whitmont, *The symbolic quest: basic concepts of analytical psychology* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), p 177.
- 5 Daryl Sharp, *Jungian psychology unplugged* (Toronto, ON: Inner City Books, 1998), p 62.
- 6 Edward C. Whitmont, *The symbolic quest*, p 196.
- 7 Terrence Real, *I don't want to talk about it: overcoming the secret legacy of male depression* (New York, NY: Fireside, 1997), p 310. This was a recent best-selling book in the United States and a necessary read for anyone interested in pastoral counselling and spiritual direction to men.
- 8 I am grateful to the late John Mattern of the C. G. Jung Institute in Zurich for the basis of this developmental concept. Also, in *Masculine and feminine: the natural flow of opposites in the psyche* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 1992), Gareth S. Hill creatively develops this concept.
- 9 James B. Nelson, *The intimate connection: male sexuality, masculine spirituality* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1988). This section relies significantly on pp 29–46.
- 10 Robert Bly, *Iron John, a book about men* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1990). This book describes at length the basic father wound many men carry.
- 11 James E. Dittes, *Driven by hope: men and meaning* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996). This article relies significantly on the insights this author presents.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp 78–79.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p 69.
- 14 Whitmont, *The symbolic quest*, p 42.
- 15 David C. James, *What are they saying about masculine spirituality?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996), p 122. In *King, warrior, magician, lover: rediscovering the archetypes of the mature masculine* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1990), Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette offer these four archetypes as central to the male psyche.
- 16 Exx 91–98 and 136–157.
- 17 Exx 95.
- 18 Moore and Gillette, *King, warrior, magician, lover*, pp 88–94.
- 19 Dittes, *Driven by hope*, pp 80–93.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp 94–122.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp 123–139.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p 126.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p 142. Italics are mine.
- 24 Exx 18.